Excerpt from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey

**Habit 1: Be Proactive**

Growing up in my home was at times a big pain. Why? Because my dad always made me take responsibility for everything in my life.

Whenever I said something like, “Dad, my girlfriend makes me so mad,” without fail my Dad would come back with: “Now come on, Sean, no one can make you made unless you let them. It’s your choice. You choose to be mad.”

Or if I said, “My new biology teacher is the worst. I’m never going to learn a thing,” Dad would say, “Why don’t you go to your teacher and give him some suggestions? Change teachers. Find a tutor if you have to. If you don’t learn biology, Sean, it’s your own fault, not your teacher’s.”

He never let me off the hook. He was always challenging me, making sure that I never blamed someone else for the way I acted. Luckily my mom let me blame other people and things for my problems or I might have turned out psycho.

I often screamed back, “You’re wrong Dad! I didn’t choose to be mad. She MADE, MADE, *MADE* me mad. Just get off my back and leave me alone.” You see, Dad’s idea that you are responsible for your life was hard medicine for me to swallow as a teenager. But, with hindsight, I see the wisdom in what he was doing. He wanted me to learn that there are two types of people in this world—the proactive and the reactive—those who take responsibility for their lives and those who blame, those who make it happen and those who get happened to.

Habit 1, Be Proactive, is the key to unlocking all the other habits and that’s why it comes first. Habit 1 says, “I am the force. I am the captain of my life. I can choose my attitude. I’m responsible for my own happiness or unhappiness. I am in the driver’s seat of my destiny, not just a passenger……”

**Proactive or Reactive…The Choice is Yours**

Each day you and I get about 100 chances to choose whether to be proactive or reactive. In any given day, the weather is bad, you get a mean text, you can’t find a job, your sister steals your hoodie, you lose an election at school, your friend talks behind your back, someone graffities your locker, your parents don’t let you take the car (for no reason), you get a parking ticket, and you flunk a test. So what’re you going to do about it? Are you in the habit of reacting to those kinds of everyday things, or are you proactive? The choice is yours. It really is. You don’t have to respond the way everyone else does, or the way people think you should.

How many times have you been driving down the road when suddenly somebody cuts in front of you, making you hit the brakes? What do you do? Scream at them? Swear? Flip them the bird? Let it ruin your day? Or do you just let it go? Laugh about it. Move on.

The choice is yours.

Reactive people make choices based on impulse. They are like a can of soda pop. When life shakes them up a bit, the pressure builds and they suddenly explode.

*“Hey you stupid jerk! Get out of my lane!”*

Proactive people make choices based on values. They *think* before they act. They recognize they can’t control everything that happens to them, but they can control what they do about it. Unlike reactive people who are full of carbonation, proactive people are like water. Shake them up all you want, take off the lid and nothing. No fizzing, no bubbling, no pressure. They stay calm, cool, and in control.

*“I’m not going to let that guy get me upset and ruin my day.”*

**Listen to your Language**

You can usually tell the difference between proactive and reactive people by the language they use. Reactive language usually sounds like this:

“That’s me. That’s just the way I am.” What they’re really saying is, *I’m not responsible for the way I act. I can’t change. I was predetermined to be this way.*

“If my chem teacher wasn’t such a jerk, things would be different.” What they’re really saying is, *School is the cause of all my problems, not me.*

“Thanks a lot. You just ruined my day.” What they’re really saying is, *I’m not in control of my own moods. You are.”*

“If only I went to a different school, had better friends, had cooler parents, had a boyfriend…then I’d be happy.” What they’re really saying is, *I’m not in control of my own happiness, “things” are. I must have things to be happy.*

Notice that reactive language takes power away from you and gives it to something or someone else. As my friend John Bytheway explains in his book *What I Wish I’d Known in High School*, when you’re reactive it’s like giving someone else the remote control and saying, “Here, change my mood anything you wish.” Proactive language, on the other hand, puts the remote control back into your own hands. You’re free to choose which channel you want to be on.

**We Can Control Only One Thing**

The fact is, we can’t control everything that happens to us. We can’t control where our ancestors came from, who will win the Superbowl, how much tuition will be next fall, or how others might treat us. But there is one thing we can control: *how we respond to what happens to us.* And that is what counts! This is why we need to stop worrying about things we can’t control and start worrying about things we can.

Picture two circles. The inner circle is our circle of control. It includes things we have control over—ourselves, our attitudes, our choices, our response to whatever happens to us. Surrounding the circle of control is the circle of no control. It includes the thousands of things we can’t do anything about.

Now, what will happen if we spend our time and energy worrying about things we can’t control, like a rude comment, a past mistake, or the fact that it’s raining on a good hair day? You guessed it! We’ll feel even more out of control, as if we were victims. For instance, if your sister annoys you and you’re always complaining about her weaknesses (something you have no control over), that won’t do anything to fix the problem. It’ll only cause you to blame your problems on her and lose power yourself. Ignore the rude comment, avoid making the mistake next time, and get an umbrella for the rain. You are the star of your own life. Focus on what you can influence.

Circle of Control: Choices, responses, ourselves, attitude

Circle of No Control (Skin color, weather, past mistakes, parents, rude comments, location of birth, other people in general, etc.)

**Turning Setbacks into Triumphs**

Life often deals us a bad hand but it’s up to you to think to yourself: “I’ve got this. I can get through it.” By the way, think of how boring you’d be if nothing challenging ever happened to you—you’d never learn and then you’d never change! Every setback is an opportunity to turn it into a triumph, as this account by Brad Lemley from *Parade* magazine shows:

“It’s not what happens to you in life, it’s what you do about it,” says W. Mitchell, a self-made millionaire, a sought-after speaker, a former mayor, a river rafter, and skydiver. And he accomplished all of this after his accidents.

If you saw Mitchell you’d find this hard to believe. You see, this guy’s face is a patchwork of multicolored skin grafts, the fingers of both his hands are either missing or mere stubs, and his paralyzed legs lie thin and useless under his slacks. Mitchell says sometimes people try to guess how he was injured. A car wreck? Vietnam? The real story is more astounding than one could ever imagine. On June 19, 1971, he was on top of the world—young, healthy, and popular. The day before, he had brought a beautiful new motorcycle. That morning, he soloed in an airplane for the first time.

“That afternoon, I got on that motorcycle to ride to work,” he recalls, “and at an intersection, a laundry truck and I collided. The bike went down, crushed my elbow and fractured my pelvis, and the gas can popped open on the motorcycle. The gas poured out, the heat of the engine ignited it, and I got burned over 65 percent of my body.” Fortunately, a quick-thinking man in a nearby car lot doused Mitchell with a fire extinguisher and saved his life.

Even so, Mitchell’s face had been burned off, his fingers were black, charred, and twisted, his legs were nothing but raw, red flesh. It was common for first-time visitors to look at him and faint. He was unconscious for two weeks, and then he awakened.

Over four months, he had 13 transfusions, 16 skin-graft operations, and several other surgeries. Four years later, after spending months in rehabilitation and years learning to adapt to his new handicaps, the unthinkable happened. Mitchell was involved in a freak airplane crash, and was paralyzed from the waist down. “When I tell people there were two separate accidents,” he says, “they can hardly stand it.”

After his paralyzing plane crash accident, Mitchell recalls meeting a nineteen-year-old patient in the hospital’s gymnasium. “This guy had also been paralyzed. He had been a mountain climber, a skier, an active outdoors person, and he was convinced his life was over. Finally, I went over to this guy and said, ‘You know something? Before all this happened to me, there were 10,000 things I could do. Now there are 9,000. I could spend the rest of my life dwelling on the 1,000 that I lost, but I choose to focus on the 9.000 that are left.’”

Mitchell says his secret is twofold. First is the love and encouragement of friends and family, and second is a personal philosophy he has gleaned from various sources. He realized he did not have to buy into society’s notion that one must be handsome and healthy to be happy. “I am in charge of my own spaceship,” he states emphatically. “It is my up, my down. I could choose to see this situation as a setback or a starting point.”

I like how Helen Keller put it, “So much has been given to me. I have no time to ponder that which has been denied.”

Although most of our setbacks won’t be as severe as Mitchell’s, all of us will have our fair share. You might get dumped, you may lose an election at school, you may get beaten up, you may not get accepted into the school of your choice, you may become seriously ill. I hope and believe that you will be proactive and strong in these defining moments.